

The *For the Love of the Poor* Homily of Saint Gregory the Theologian: A Social Analysis*

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In the context of the study, research and consolidation of the Sociology of Religion, the written monuments of religious discourse play an undeniably important role, which clearly determine the cultural references and traditions of a people¹. Moreover, the contribution of historical knowledge also consists in the understanding of the social environment². As early as the time of classical antiquity it is attested that religion was a very important factor influencing all manifestations of human life. Religion, was the context in which poetry, theater, dance, arts and family life were included³.

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1. In the context of the contemporary interdisciplinary dialogue, there are no conflicting autonomies between the science of Sociology and Theology-Science of Religion. See K. Kotsiopoulos, *Κοινωνιολογία τοῦ Χριστιανισμοῦ*, Mygdonia Publications, Thessaloniki 2017, p. 9 ff.; see also Ap. Nikolaidis, *Κοινωνιολογία τῆς Θρησκείας*, Grigoris Publications, Athens 2007, p. 76 ff.

2. See Th. Veremis – V. Kremmydas, *Ὁ σύγχρονος κόσμος*, Thyrothito – Dardanos Publications, Athens 2001.

3. Chr. Christou, *Ἑλληνικὴ Πατρολογία*, vol. A', Kyromanos Publications, Thessaloniki 1999, p. 48.

More specifically, the texts of the Patristic tradition, which “from the Fathers” are passed down from generation to generation as “inheritance by succession”⁴, communicate in a unique way with modern reality, answering contemporary social questions and current social concerns. A similar text is the *Περὶ φιλοπτωχείας* homily of Saint Gregory the Theologian, which together with his *Κατὰ πλουτούντων* poem is a very important source both for the teaching of the Holy father in relation to wealth, property, and poverty as well as for the particular social and economic conditions of his time, as well as the references and comparisons that we can make with today’s era.

We already live in the times of the diffusion of dangers⁵, of the promoted by globalization polyarchy of values, as well as of multilevel poverty (e.g. energy poverty), conditions that also highlight the global demand for sustainability. An indeed critical period, when official UN figures, show that 25.000 people a day die of hunger⁶, at the same time that the wealth of the three richest people in the world exceeds the GDP of the 43 poorest countries and their 600 million of inhabitants⁷. As it is also evidenced in the official texts of the Holy and Great Synod in Kolybari in 2016, “rivalries and hostilities in the world introduce injustice and inequality in the participation of people and nations in the goods of divine creation. They deprive millions of people of basic goods and lead to the impoverishment of human existence...”⁸.

In these circumstances the homily of the great Cappadocian Father and one of the Three Holy Hierarchs is considered particularly important, and his teachings and messages timely and useful. Poverty, diachronic and especially in today’s conditions, is a situation inherent in social

4. *Op.cit.*, p. 24.

5. See N. Denaxas, *Ἡ κοινωνία τῆς διακινδύνευσης κατὰ τὸν U. Beck καὶ ὁ ρόλος τῆς θρησκείας*, Kyriakidis Publications, Thessaloniki 2021.

6. J. Holmes, “Losing 25000 to hunger every day”, *un.org* [4/8/2022].

7. K. Kotsiopoulos, *Παγκοσμιοποίηση. Κατασκευὴ καὶ πραγματικότητα*, Kyriakidis Publications, Thessaloniki 2020, pp. 112-113.

8. *Οἱ ἀποφάσεις τῆς Ἀγίας καὶ Μεγάλης Συνόδου τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Ἐκκλησίας*, CEMES Publications, Thessaloniki 2017, p. 57.

exclusion⁹. In the context of the perspective that is opened up through Christian teaching as well as through the written monuments of the Patristic tradition, the words *poor* and *poverty* take on religious content and become synonyms with the words *righteous* and *pious*¹⁰.

Gregory the Theologian, born in Arianus of Nazianzus around 329, showed his enthusiasm for letters from an early age¹¹. He studied at the famous schools of Caesarea, Palestine and Alexandria, while around 350 he attended rhetoric and philosophy courses, in Athens, where, due to his remarkable performance the associations of students forced him to remain as professor before returning to his homeland¹². He was also connected by close friendship, from his student years, with “the other Cappadocian” Church Father, Basil the Great.

In 381 he assumed the duties of Archbishop of Constantinople, and the presidency of the Second Ecumenical Council. He appears deeply disappointed by the meanness and the unsubstantiated accusations of some of the participants. However, having forged a high Orthodox moral, as proved by his attitude throughout the turbulent period in the context of the successive conflicts with the followers of Arius, the venerable hierarch preferred to resign both the throne and the presidency of the Synod, returning to his homeland¹³. About a year later he will deliver a

9. N. Denaxas, *Καπιταλιστική κρίση και χριστιανισμός – κοινωνιολογική διερεύνηση*, doctoral dissertation submitted to the Department of Pastoral and Social Theology of the Theological School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki 2016, p. 199 ff.

10. The German philosopher and professor Georg Simmel, in the perspective of the critical view of charisma, will find that both wealth and poverty can produce religiosity. See D. Hervieu-Léger and J.-P. Willaime, *Κοινωνικές Θεωρίες και Θρησκεία*, ed. Niki I. Papageorgiou, transl. K. Tsikerdanos, Kritiki Publications, Athens 2005, p. 183 ff.; see also G. Mantzaridis, «Ἡ χριστιανική κοινωνία καὶ ὁ κόσμος», *Ἐπιστημονική Ἐπετηρὶς Θεολογικῆς Σχολῆς Πανεπιστημίου Θεσσαλονίκης/Epistimoniki Epetiris tis Theologikis Scholis Panepistimiou Thessalonikis*, vol. IB' (1967), p. 60 ff.; P. Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, University Press of New England, Hanover 2002.

11. Chr. Christou, *Ἐκκλησιαστική Γραμματολογία*, vol. A', Kyromanos Publications, Thessaloniki 1998, p. 198 ff.; see also Ath. Glaros, entry «Γρηγόριος ὁ Θεολόγος», *Μεγάλη Ὁρθόδοξη Χριστιανική Ἐγκυκλοπαίδεια (Μ.Ο.Χ.Ε.)/Megali Orthodoxi Christianiki Engyklopaideia*, Stratigikes Ekdoseis Publications, p. 393.

12. Ath. Glaros, op.cit.

13. Op.cit., p. 394.

long epitaph in memory of Basil the Great¹⁴, with the dormition of Saint Gregory being placed around 390, after a long and painful illness¹⁵.

The homily *Περὶ φιλοπτωχείας* was probably delivered in 373 in Caesarea. On the occasion of Paul's saying that love is the crowning of the virtues, he urges its practice, which should be the help of the poor¹⁶. The Holy father sympathetic and not hypocritically distancing himself from the social problems of his time, participant and supporter of the people of his province, already from the very first words addresses his fellow human beings as «*συμπένης*»¹⁷.

He schematically gives the prerequisites for spiritual poverty, perhaps more important than the poverty that the people measure by their own secular "small measures" («*μικρὰ μέτρα*»)¹⁸, since it is the spiritual bread that really nourishes the spiritual hungry souls. He calls on the faithful to accept his word in good faith: «*ἵνα Βασιλεία πλουτήσητε*»¹⁹. Clearly the holy father is moving within the framework of the Orthodox principle of dialectic of affirmation and transcendence of the world, which does not amount to the abolition of the secular institutions, but with their qualitative transformation²⁰.

Centuries before Keynes, who characterizes the phenomenon of poverty as paradoxical, –especially when it manifests itself in a period of economic growth and abundance–²¹, or Bauman, who points out that: "Poverty is a social and mental state [...] 'and being poor', means that you are excluded from everything that is perceived as: "normal life"²², the Holy father attempts to redefine poverty and wealth, by focusing on the spiritual virtues and goods that each person is capable of acquiring, as long as he wants to.

14. *Op.cit.*, p. 395.

15. *Op.cit.*

16. *Op.cit.*, p. 396.

17. Gregory the Theologian, *Λόγος ΙΔ*, Ε.Π.Ε., vol. 5, p. 368.

18. *Op.cit.*

19. *Op.cit.*

20. K. Kotsiopoulos, *Ἀνάλεκτα Κοινωνιολογίας τοῦ Χριστιανισμοῦ*, Kyriakidis Publications, Thessaloniki 2020, p. 10.

21. J. M. Keynes, *Ἡ γενική θεωρία τῆς ἀπασχόλησης, τοῦ τόκου καὶ τοῦ χρήματος*, ed. M. M. Psalidopoulos, transl. Th. Athanasiou, Papazisis Publications, Athens 2001, p. 80.

22. Z. Bauman, *Ἡ ἐργασία, ὁ καταναλωτισμὸς καὶ οἱ νεόπτωχοι*, transl. (Greek) K. Geormas, Metaichmio Publications, Athens 2004, p. 113.

In his specific intervention, Saint Gregory will emphasize that: «Καλὸν ἢ ἀκτημοσύνη» (“Landlessness is good”), that is the disposal of the accumulated or uncommunicated wealth²³. He focuses on the problem of wealth on religious ministers, who live for the Gospel, since landlessness is for Gregory a prerequisite for following the Royal Way²⁴. Citing the example of Zacchaeus, who distributed his possessions in order to welcome the Lord, Saint Gregory points out that: «καλὸν θεωρία καὶ καλὸν πράξις», since the former lifts us up the earthly things and the latter serves love and consequently Christ Himself through deeds.

Besides in Christianity human value does not depend on its external characteristics, from the economic power or weakness of each human, but on the common human essence, with its origin from the same Father²⁵. It is rightly observed that the Orthodox tradition “imbued with its spirituality the persons and the bearers of the power, so that the ideological mechanisms of the State to move in the direction of philanthropy, reconciliation, classlessness and equality”²⁶.

Rich and poor are both God’s creatures, the holy father tells us, even if their possessions are unequal²⁷. Let us consider how important the above exhortations of Gregory are, at a time when the power of “apathetic” and “uncommunicated” wealth is regulated, that is the over-accumulated profits that are not reinvested in the real economy. As it is rightly pointed out, “modern globalized Capitalism, is not based on the real economy of the tangible and material goods produced, but on the virtual economy of the digital operation of the intangible securities”²⁸.

23. On wealth and greed see Ap. Nikolaidis, *Δόγματα καὶ Κοινωνία*, Grigoris Publications, Athens 2009, p. 142 ff.; see also G. Mantzaridis, *Χριστιανικὴ Ἠθικὴ II*, Pournaras Publications, Thessaloniki 2010, p. 461.

24. J. A. McGuckin, “St. Gregory of Nazianzus on the Love of the Poor (Oration 14)”, στί: N. Dumitrașcu (ed.), *The Ecumenical Legacy of the Cappadocians*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2016, p. 139.

25. Protopr. Th. Zisis, *Ἠθικὰ Κεφάλαια*, Bryennios Publications, Thessaloniki 2002, p. 64.

26. K. Kotsiopoulos, *Κοινωνιολογία τοῦ Χριστιανισμοῦ*, *op.cit.*, p. 302. See also Emm. Clapsis, “Wealth and Poverty in Christian tradition”, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 54, 1-4 (1981), pp. 169-187.

27. Gregory the Theologian, *Λόγος ΙΔ*, Ε.Π.Ε., v. 5.

28. K. Kotsiopoulos, *Παγκοσμιοποίηση. Κατασκευὴ καὶ πραγματικότητα*, *op.cit.*, p.

Gregory believes that all people are equal in front of God, emphasizing that: «[...] τὰς πρώτας τοῦ ζῆν ἀφορμὰς ἀφθόνους ἅπασιν ἔχαρίσατο, οὐ δυναστεία κρατουμένας, ἀλλὰ καὶ κοινὰς τὰς αὐτὰς καὶ πλουσίας καὶ οὐδὲν παρὰ τοῦτο ἐνδεεστέρας προέθηκεν»²⁹. The Holy father exactly as Saint John Chrysostom who distinguishes the material goods to free and not free, points out that all people are born free and they can freely enjoy what was given from God³⁰.

What has been given to man through creation is defined as free, so that he can enjoy it without restrictions and conditions. As non-free are defined the things that are acquired through work, that is those that have wealth, money or possession as prerequisite for possession and use.

Gregory the Theologian through his *Περὶ φιλοπτωχείας* homily essentially recounts the systematization of the economic factor that diachronically shapes social-class inequalities. He characteristically says that from the time people mined gold, silver and precious stones and highlighted these elements as dominant magnitudes of the social and economic relations, social pathogenies appeared as «ἀρρώσθημα κοινὰ τινὰ τῆ κακίᾳ συνεισπεσόντα»³¹. The Fathers of the Church, like Saint Gregory the Theologian, do not uncritically support the institution of property.

The wealth or money as general commercial equivalent, are by themselves morally neutral³². Already in the context of ancient Greek philosophy and particularly of Aristotelian thought, of which Gregory was also a knowledgeable and scholar, it will be stated that money is an intermediate term, a regulatory instrument in transactions as an exchangeable substitute of necessity³³. Their good or bad use is the one that gives the corresponding sign and causes the respective social

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29. Gregory the Theologian, *op.cit.*

30. *Op.cit.*

31. Gregory the Theologian, *op.cit.*

32. N. Denaxas, *Καπιταλιστική κρίση καὶ χριστιανισμός – κοινωνιολογική διερεύνηση*, *op.cit.*, p. 110.

33. See Aristotle, *Ἠθικὰ Νικομάχεια*, 1133b ff., transl. D. Lypourlis, Zitros Publications, Thessaloniki 2006.

consequences. Characteristic is what Harvard Professor Niall Ferguson mentions about the Inkas, who until the period of the collapse of their empire in 1532 ignored the monetary value of precious metals, appreciating only their aesthetic gifts³⁴. For the Inkas, gold was the “the sweat of the sun” and silver “the tear of the moon”³⁵.

The unequal distribution of wealth for the Fathers of the Church is a fundamental cosmological arrangement, a pedagogical measure of God’s wisdom, completely integrated in the eschatological teaching of the Church. Free goods were created by God or by His grace and are offered to the people for use and thanksgiving³⁶ and not for the abuse and satisfaction of greed, in the context of the social mutual inclusion, class cooperation rather than conflict, and the reciprocity of the social dependencies.

The passage of the *Psalms* that states: «*Τοῦ Κυρίου ἡ γῆ καὶ τὸ πλήρωμα αὐτῆς, ἡ οἰκουμένη καὶ πάντες οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐν αὐτῇ*»³⁷ is characteristic. Even in the Mosaic Law it is pointed out that the economic, non-free goods, belong mainly to God Himself³⁸. Therefore, also for Gregory the Theologian, man is considered a steward and not a master of the goods that are in his disposal. For Gregory, everything comes from God and therefore essentially belongs to Him. That is why he urges people not to abuse what has been given by God and to imitate God’s equality in the access to these goods.

The secular empirical research as well as the observation of the course of societies today, leads us to the conclusion that there is a tendency to degrade the value of the person and the apotheosis of individuality with the simultaneous effort to adapt to the speed with which information travels, a fact that also drags along the speed with which people are called to feel, intuit, sense and interact³⁹.

34. N. Ferguson, *Ἡ ἐξέλιξη τοῦ χρήματος*, transl. Eutychia Pagoulatou, Alexandria Publications, Athens 2011, p. 33.

35. *Op.cit.*

36. G. Mantzaridis, *op.cit.*, p. 451.

37. *Ps.* 23, 1.

38. *Ex.* 19, 5.

39. V. Gaitanis, referring to Baudrillard, speaks of the end of referentiality and symbolism in the simulated era of the super-real. See more V. Gaitanis, *Ἀπὸ τὴν Κοινωνία στὴν*

Thus, we arrive at “a society of unsociable individuals, who are indifferent to society as a whole and to their fellow human beings, with the spectrum of poverty and the social exclusion lurking like ghosts in our progressive and otherwise civilized societies”⁴⁰. It is a comfort of course to know that people do not seem to surrender easily to the despair condemned by the deliberately abstract and incoherent character of our time, but to return to religious reference and religious traditions, and in the case of Christianity, to faith in the concrete and life-giving⁴¹.

In relation always to poverty, it is rightly attested that: “Poor today is not a rich with less money, but “another man”, the personification of all “public evils” [...] is excluded from the universe of moral values of the society”⁴². The poor not being able to consume, become a moral harassment.

Therefore, as today, likewise in his time Gregory, through vivid descriptions, castigates the hypocrisy of people in dealing with the social problem of poverty and the social exclusion. He highlights the necessity of philanthropy, interpersonal forgiveness⁴³, mercy – universal Christian values that have been proven to enhance social cohesion and peace.

Just as Christ often uses examples to educate people, so Gregory brings in his Homily an example obviously from his contemporary social practice, which does not differ from our modern reality. Speaking about the poor

Επικοινωνία, Grigoris Publications, Athens 2008, p. 93.

40. K. Kotsiopoulos, *Παγκοσμιοποίηση. Κατασκευή και πραγματικότητα*, *op.cit.*, p. 112.

41. See R. Crawford, *Τί είναι Θρησκεία*, transl. M. Bletas, Savalas Publishers, Athens 2004· see also K. Kotsiopoulos, «Πολιτιστική διπλωματία και Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο», lecture in the International Conference: “Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew: Thirty Years of Ministry” (*Proceedings* in Print).

42. K. D. Geormas, «Προλογικό σημείωμα», in: Z. Bauman, *Η εργασία, ό καταναλωτισμός και οι νεόπτωχοι*, Metaichmio Publications, Athens 2004, p. 15; see also G. Panousis, *Τò ἔγκλημα τοῦ φτωχοῦ και ἡ φτώχεια ὡς «ἔγκλημα» (σὲ συνθήκες παγκοσμιοποίησης)*, Ant. N. Sakkoulas Publications, Athens 2002, pp. 18-19. Sakis Karagiorgas also points out that: “A person is in a state of poverty, when his consummation is less than the 50% of the average consummation of an adult”. S. Karagiorgas, *Διαστάσεις τῆς φτώχειας στὴν Ελλάδα*, vol. Α', National Centre for Social Research –ΕΚΚΕ– Publications, Athens 1999, p. 50.

43. See relatively, S. K. Tsitsigos, *Η διαπροσωπική συγχωρητικότητα*, Tremendum Publications, Athens 2018.

patients of his time, people who suffer from serious illnesses and do not have access to treatment points out that: «Καὶ πλέον ἔχει νόσου κακία καὶ τὸ μὲν ἀπάνθρωπον ὡς ἐλευθέριον ἠσπασάμεθα, τὸ δὲ συμπαθὲς ὡς αἰσχρὸν ἠτιμάσαμεν»⁴⁴, that is that the people seem to have accepted evil and inhumanity, while they underestimate sympathy and compassion as something terrible.

As it has already been said, it seems that the contemporaries of Gregory treated the sick and poor as a moral nuisance expelling them from their homes and the public spaces, condemning them to live in the despair of loneliness and their sufferings. However, for the Holy father philanthropy is the real food, the real wealth and the way to the conquest of true freedom.

The life of the Church, as it is witnessed by the Fathers and Saint Gregory the Theologian, is a constant intermingling and interconnection of the divine-human and social character of the believing community, while it does not have an abstract metaphysical theoretical or ideological character⁴⁵ and it is according to Orthodox ecclesiology, a historical and empirical fact⁴⁶. Martyred Cappadocia, the land of the Fathers, the bulwark of the right faith, was, is and will remain a very important point of reference for the world cultural heritage of the Ecumenical Orthodox Christianity and the ecumenical hellenism.

44. Gregory the Theologian, *Λόγος ΙΔ'*, E.P.E., v. 5

45. K. Kotsiopoulos, *Ἡ κοινότητα – συμβολὴ στὴν κοινωνιολογικὴ διερεύνηση τοῦ χριστιανισμοῦ*, Vantias Publications, Thessaloniki 2009, p. 104.

46. *Op.cit.*